Understanding Others Emotions

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Abstract

Understanding the emotions of others can be a very tedious task. A variety of emotions are witnessed when we interact and communicate with people around us. These can be labelled as joy, anger, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, contempt and so on. An emotional response of a person reveals not only the individual’s emotional reaction but also the extent of socio-cultural influence impinging on the person. Careful observation of other people’s emotions reveals their hidden intentions as well as motivations. This paper tries to unfold the many mysteries that are involved in perceiving, understanding, and interpreting others emotions. This has important psycho-social benefits influencing health and well being.

Key words: emotional expression, culture, non-verbal behaviors, health

Expressive faces and voices tend to be windows to the soul. Emotional expressions are observable verbal and nonverbal behaviors that communicate and / or symbolize emotional experience. Expression can occur with or without self-awareness. They can be controlled and involve varying degrees of deliberate intent. As Butler and Gross (2009) suggests that certain goals are provoked and satisfied by emotions. Russell (1994) stated that smiles, chuckles, guffaws, smirks, frowns, and sobs, tone of a voice, all are essential aspects of human social interaction. Some emotional expressions are Goffman’s (1959) given (produced for the purpose of communication) and others are given off (side-effects of movements produced for other purposes). The emotional expressions are related to the experience of emotion (Adelman & Zajonc, 1989). Understanding of emotion reflects the capacity to analyse emotions, to appreciate their probable trends over time and understand their outcomes (Frijda, 1988). Izard (1994) and Ekman (1994) suggested the role of neuro-cultural substrates in the modulation of emotion. Ekman and Oster (1979) emphasised that facial expressions of emotions are universally recognized but the expressions of emotions (though innate) may be modulated by culture-specific display norms. Izard (1994) suggested that facial expressions show individual and cultural variability in the semantic meaning attributed to it. He argued that these expressions might be innate and hence may not be displayed by adults in all cultures. But he also suggested that they could be universal due to the cultural learning.

Non-verbal emotional expressions

It is very fascinating to understand emotions through non-verbal emotional expressions as facial expressions, gestures and postures. Sometimes these non-verbal behaviors reveal more than words. People often vary in the extent to which they express their emotions overtly. There may be social, cultural or genetic reasons for these. Emotionality has been traditionally conceptualised as the tendency to shift from appositive or neutral emotional state to a negative one (Watson & Clark, 1984); disposition to experience positive or negative emotions (Tellegen et al., 1988). Emotional expressiveness involves a display of emotions outwardly, regardless of its valence (positive or negative) or channel (facial, or gestures) (Kring et al., 1994). While understanding the emotional expression of another person we tend to rely on the judges’ ratings of the accuracy of the emotional display, the quality, magnitude and intensity of the expressed emotion. The quality of the emotion expression indicates the extent to which the displayed emotion is occurring in response to a stimulus with the similar or varying hedonic tone. Sometimes researchers are merely interested in understanding the range of emotions that people can express with relative accuracy. “Expressive behaviour reflects...
not only the sender's emotional experience, whether it be genuine or dissembled, but also social information about the nature of the relationship between sender and receiver" (Saarni, 1989, p. 185). Emotions that are posed display with some accuracy, an individual’s underlying ability or skill at producing nonverbal behaviors deliberately to convey information to others. On the other hand spontaneous displays refer to how visibly one reacts as expected to affective stimuli.

Measuring emotional expressions

Emotional expressions of other people are generally measured by using the ratings of judges in determining the accuracy with which emotions are being expressed. Certain parameters are established and the specific features of expression are observed carefully. There are many researchers who are trying to find out the specific features on the face that would reveal the nature as well as the intensity of the expressed emotion, so that a universal index of emotion expression is determined. For example, Affect Intensity Measure (AIM) (Larsen, 1984) measures the strength of individual’s emotional experiences. It assesses the magnitude with which positive and negative emotions are experienced by people. Affectometer 2 (Kammann & Flett, 1983) measures the frequency of positive and negative affect. Revised Social anhedonia Scale (Mishlove & Chapman, 1985) measures the people’s ability to experience pleasure, related to interpersonal situations and interactions. There are many other measures that code observable facial expressions using specific components of facial behaviour that respond to emotions as anger or fear (Izard, 1979; Ekman, 1982). The Facial Action Coding system (FACS) (Ekman, 1976, 1978) measures specific facial muscle movements that are believed to be associated with basic emotions as happy, sad, surprise, anger, disgust and fear. While Russell (1980) argued for a dimensional approach to facial expression that involves valence and arousal. The FACES (Kring & Sloan, 1991) measures the emotional expression as any change from a neutral display to a non-neutral display and back to neutral display. The coders assess the frequency count of the expressions initiated, and their valence and intensity of each expression.

Influence of social factors

The emotional response of a person also depends upon the social context in which it occurs. To what extent social contextual constraints mediate the experience and expression of emotions is yet to be analysed comprehensively. In order to understand the other person’s emotion, it is important to understand the social context in which it occurs. In Indian culture as compared to the Western cultures, there is more social sharing, this explicitly tend to influence emotional processing. The social level of analysis of adult emotion and emotion regulation needs to be attended to (Gross, 2007). Though most of the research focuses on the emotions of a person, but what is also important is to understand how the emotional responses of an individual systematically influence the social environment in which it is elicited. According to Rimé social sharing helps the person to communicate to others the circumstances of an emotionally evocative event and his or her reactions to it. When emotions are expressed to others they are likely to reactivate their personal emotional experience that they had experienced when the event had taken place. However it is believed that sharing of negative emotions helps to reinstate their attachment system. When emotions are shared with other people they often respond with empathy, intimacy or show reciprocal attachment behaviors. These behaviors satisfy their social need of attachment and belongingness. It has also been shown that emotion suppression reduces interpersonal interaction and affiliation. Cultural factors also tend to influence the outcomes of emotion suppression. Suppression of emotions made Asian American women more interpersonally responsive as compared to European American women (Butler, Lee, & Gross, 2007). Emotions are cognitive appraisals of situations which affect, deeply and intimately, the person and his/her relationships with the social world (Ratner, 2000). The Social Relations Model (SRM: Kenny, 1994) explains the dyadic processes involved in interpersonal perception in the communication of emotion cues. It is suggested that there is a relational association between emotional expression and emotion recognition. The individual’s ability to express emotions depends upon the ability of the perceiver to understand this expression. Similarly an individual’s perception ability depends also on the ability of an expresser to generate an appropriate stimulus for the perceiver to judge.
Cultural influence on emotional expressions

Emotions are cultural appraisals made on the basis of cultural values, beliefs and norms (Ratner, 2000). This means that emotions are scripts, cultural constructions that tell people what they should feel and experience. Hence, emotions are culturally relative. The ability to experience culturally salient emotions is acquired through enculturation and not due to biological predisposition nor given naturally. Based on cultural values and beliefs, these appraisals are made in terms of their implications for the self and its relationships with social others, things and events that are relevant for the individual. Emotional expressions involve the self deeply. The intent of displaying emotional expressions is to protect the experiencing self’s self-esteem, in accordance with social norms and expectations. The socio-cultural norms propose the socially appropriate ways to express the emotion in action, words, gestures or facial expressions. For example, the stiff upper lip, beating one’s breast, social mourning such as Rudali in rural Rajasthan, placing flowers on the graves of the dear departed in European culture, hugging in uniting with family, happiness or grief in Western as well as modern Indian culture, bowing to pay respect as in Japanese culture or folded hands in Indian Culture, or lying down in an extended way in Sri Lanka culture. There are endless examples of how culture mediates our emotional expressions of gratitude.

Sometimes judgment biases and errors mediate our perceptions of emotional response. Such variability in response categories reveals the attributional style while making emotional judgments. Individual differences exist in emotion perception. Some people tend to endorse certain emotions more frequently than others. It is argued that frequent personal experience with particular emotions tends to prime individuals toward those emotional states. Research reveals a relationship between emotional response bias and important social phenomena, particularly between hostile attribution bias and children’s social adjustment. Aggressive boys have a general bias toward seeing anger and threat in the nonverbal behavior of others (Schultz, Izard, & Ackerman, 2000). It has been observed that collectivistic cultural groups avoid recognizing negative emotion in order to preserve social order (Matsumoto, 1992). While individualistic societies like the United States tolerate and even may encourage the perception of negative emotion. Thus suggesting that collectivist groups show response bias in which they are less likely to attribute negative emotions to others. Furthermore, this tendency would be especially strong when judging members of their own cultural group, with whom social order would be more important. Hence it is suggested that valence response bias in emotion recognition is more positive among perceivers from collectivistic rather than individualistic cultures. Also that valence response bias is more positive when judging emotions expressed by members of the perceivers’ own cultural group (Elfenbein et al., 2002).

Hochschild (1981) argues that cultural beliefs about emotion influence individuals’ feelings and expressions. He suggested that feeling rules are cultural norms that specify the appropriate type, intensity, duration, and target of subjective feelings. Expression rules are cultural norms that regulate the type, intensity, duration, and target of emotional behavior (or affective displays). Hence these rules provide standards by which individuals judge their own and other’s emotions. When people’s feelings and expressions depart from cultural norms, they often engage in emotion management, expression management, or both in order to create a more appropriate emotional response.

Gender differences in emotional expression

Hochschild’s normative theory about emotion (1981) predicts male-female differences in feelings and expressive behavior that are consistent with gender-specific emotion beliefs. He suggests that our emotion culture includes feeling and expression norms. These normsspecify that women should, and men should not, be emotional and emotionally expressive. According to these norms men are discouraged from feeling and expressing sadness and women from feeling and expressing anger. Though it has often been reported that women experience and express emotions more frequently than men. Women experience and express sadness more often than men who experience and express...
anger more often than women. Indian culture contains norms that discourage men from feeling and displaying negative emotions. However, according to Kemper’s structural theory about emotion (1981) structural factors such as individuals’ social position vis-a'-vis others, rather than cultural derived emotion norms tend to influence their emotional responses to social situations. Developmental psychologists suggest that the expression of emotion may be more heavily socialized than the experience of emotion (Fischer 2000). According to them, males learn to conceal their feelings relatively early in life, whereas females learn to express their emotions more freely.

There are mixed results with respect to gender differences in feelings and expressive behavior and gender-linked cultural beliefs about emotion. In an Indian study, Aggarwal and Kapoor (2013) reported that majority of Bania males and females report neutral feelings till the age of 30 years. Men do not report more frequent emotional experiences than women in general, however, there were differences in the frequency with which men and women reported positive and negative emotions. Women reported more frequent positive and negative feelings than men. Men reported more frequent feelings of liveliness, satisfaction, excitement and anger. Whereas women reported more frequent feelings of anxiety, sadness and embarrassment after the age of 40 years. Menon and Shweder (1994) found that men find it easier to experience and express un-civilizing emotions (abhadrabhava) like rage (krodha) and laughter (hasa), while women are more likely to experience refining emotions (bhadrabhava) like reticence, modesty and deference (lajja).

Emotional expressiveness in Psychopathology and Health
Emotional expressiveness also serves as a diagnostic indicator at times. For Example, low or no emotional expressiveness, “flat effect” has been regarded as a central feature of schizophrenia (Bleuler, 1911/1950), several diagnostic schemes (e.g., Abrams & Taylor, 1978), and important prognostic indicator (Fenton & McGlashan, 1991). Expressiveness has also been implicated in histrionic personality disorders where emphasis is laid upon rapidly shifting and shallow expression of emotion, while constricted expression of emotion has been considered as a criterion for both schizotypal and schizoid personality disorders (Krings et al., 1994). Low emotional expressiveness has been observed among children with bronchial asthma (Hollaender & Florin, 1983), Type A men (Friedman et al., 1980), breast cancer (e.g., Temoshok et al., 1985). Hence, emotional expression has been the focal point of interest in understanding its relationship with specific diseases and health in general. Some people are generally more expressive than others. A person’s dispositional expressiveness may also vary in different situations and circumstances.

Implications
If we are able to figure out the distinct features of emotional expressiveness, both in positive and negative emotions across varying cultures, globally then we would be better able to understand the emotional dispositions of people irrespective of their ethnicity or cultural differences. It would help us to understand the specific modes of responsiveness which would facilitate in the diagnosis of any psychological disorder. It would also help in prevention of any serious ailments, or prediction of psycho-social health. The emotional expressions would also help us understand the motivational inclinations behind certain behaviour patterns, or the goal directed intensions of displaying certain emotions to others. Individual differences in communicating emotional states via nonverbal cues are associated with important personal outcomes as broad as social adjustment, mental health, academic achievement, and workplace performance (Hall et al., 2009; Nowicki & Duke, 1994; Rosenthal et al., 1979). The measurement of emotional expression and emotion recognition can assist healthcare professionals in monitoring the prognosis and treatment of conditions such as schizophrenia and autism, school counsellors in monitoring the social adjustment of children, and, more recently, industrial psychologists in measuring the emotional skills of current and prospective employees for selection, training, and evaluation. Recognizing the non-verbal behaviors can help us decode communication process more accurately and reliably (Matsumoto, et al. 2013). This can help in interview, negotiation, interrogation or surveillance.
References


